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ABSTRACT

Since two-thirds of all adult learners plan their own education programs without professional help, outreach to these learners in their own community settings is the next important movement in education. Outreach also applies to those many adults who need help simply in coping with everyday life in this complex society. A recent study found that Americans have more trouble with everyday problems in consumer economics than in any other knowledge area, that one-fourth of Americans do not understand their rights and obligations under our system of government, that one-fifth of adults have trouble with occupational knowledge, and that people had more trouble with arithmetic than with any other learning skill tested. The responsibility for rectifying the situation in the case of adults rests with the adult education community. A set of 65 learning objectives covering occupational knowledge, consumer economics, health, community resources, and government and law, which the aforementioned study identified, is the core around which remedial instructional programs can be built. The task in adult education is to find people who would not otherwise seek help on their own and involve them in instructional programs committed to innovation and change built around real world situations. (JR)

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IS COMMITMENT ENOUGH? *

T. H. BELL
U.S. COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

IT'S ALWAYS A PLEASURE FOR ME TO COME TO SALT LAKE CITY. AS MANY OF YOU KNOW, I SPENT MOST OF MY LIFE IN THIS PART OF THE COUNTRY BEFORE JUMPING RANGE TO GO EAST AND ACCEPT A FEDERAL APPOINTMENT. ONLY ONE THING CONVINCED ME I SHOULD LEAVE THE GOOD LIFE OF THE HIGH COUNTRY FOR THE RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC ON THE POTOMAC RIVER BRIDGES. THAT WAS THE CHALLENGE TO DO SOMETHING AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL ABOUT PROBLEMS IN EDUCATION THAT CONCERN US ALL.

I'M ESPECIALLY GLAD TO BE HERE THIS TIME BECAUSE IT GIVES ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO TALK WITH SO MANY FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES INVOLVED WITH ADULT EDUCATION. INVOLVED IS THE RIGHT WORD FOR MEMBERS OF THE ADULT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION. I KNOW OF NO GROUP OF EDUCATORS MORE COMMITTED TO — OR BETTER AT — THEIR JOB.

EDUCATION CERTAINLY OFFERS NO TOUGHER JOB THAN YOURS. TODAY MORE ADULTS THAN EVER BEFORE SEE IN FORMAL EDUCATION THE ROUTE TO THEIR PERSONAL GOALS AND ASPIRATIONS, WHETHER IN CAREER ADVANCEMENT, INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT, OR DO-IT-YOURSELF SKILLS. WITH THEIR DIFFERENT ETHNIC, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND ACADEMIC BACKGROUNDS, THESE ADULT STUDENTS ARE AS DIVERSE AS THE POPULATION. MEETING THEIR LEARNING NEEDS IS A DIFFICULT JOB, AND YOU HANDLE IT VERY WELL, INDEED.

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ADULT EDUCATION HAS BEEN THE BUTT OF SOME PRETTY FAR-OUT JOKES ABOUT ITS EFFORTS TO PROVIDE COURSES FOR STUDENTS WHO WANT KNOWLEDGE ON JUST ABOUT EVERY CONCEIVABLE SUBJECT, MUCH OF IT CONCURRENTLY. WOODY ALLEN ONCE SAID HE HAD PUT TOGETHER THE ULTIMATE ADULT EDUCATION COURSE, ONE THAT MANAGED TO COVER BOTH MAN'S INTELLECTUAL CRAVING AND HIS PRACTICAL NEEDS. ALLEN CALLED THE COURSE "YEATS AND HYGIENE -- A COMPARATIVE STUDY," SUBTITLED "THE POETRY OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS AS ANALYZED AGAINST A PACKGROUND OF PROPER DENTAL CARE." WHILE THAT COMBINATION IS A BIT MUCH, I KNOW THAT CURRICULUM DEVELOPERS DO FACE FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES.

I'VE BEEN ASKED TO FOCUS MY REMARKS ON YOUR CONFERENCE THEME -- "OUR COMMITMENT TO A LEARNING SOCIETY" -- AND TO COMMENT ON THE NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THAT THEME. I MUST SAY YOUR PROGRAM PLANNERS WERE THINKING BIG BOTH WHEN THEY DEVELOPED THE CONFERENCE THEME AND WHEN THEY HANDED ME MY ASSIGNMENT.

IN OUR BICENTENNIAL YEAR A NUMBER OF FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES IN OUR SOCIETY ARE BEING CAREFULLY RE-EXAMINED. OUR COMMITMENT TO A LEARNING SOCIETY SHOULD CERTAINLY BE ONE OF THEM. IT'S A WHERE-DO-WE-GO-FROM-HERE ISSUE. IT SHOULD BE THE SUBJECT OF MANY THOUGHT-PROVOKING PAPERS AND CONFERENCES. IT'S MORE THAN I CAN HANDLE ADEQUATELY IN A FEW MINUTES. HOWEVER, LET ME DEAL WITH SOME IDEAS THAT I FEEL SHOULD BE PART OF THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE.

WHAT HAS SET AMERICA APART FROM MUCH OF THE REST OF THE WORLD IS ITS FIRM BELIEF THAT EDUCATION IS EVERY PERSON'S ROAD TO JUST ABOUT ANY PLACE HE OR SHE WANTS TO GO. COMMITTED EDUCATORS HAVE WORKED FOR GENERATIONS TO MAKE EDUCATION LIVE UP TO THAT PROMISE. THERE HAVE BEEN INEQUITIES IN PROVIDING ACCESS TO THE DREAM MACHINE AT THE POSTSECONDARY LEVEL FOR MINORITIES AND WOMEN. BUT WE HAVE MADE CONSIDERABLE PROGRESS TOWARD PROVIDING EQUAL ACCESS IN RECENT YEARS, AND THE RECORD IS GETTING BETTER EACH YEAR.

SO I WOULD ASK EDUCATION, AND ADULT EDUCATION IN PARTICULAR:

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF OUR COMMITMENT? HOW FAR ARE WE WILLING TO GO -- HOW MUCH ARE WE WILLING TO CHANGE THE STRUCTURE OF EDUCATION -- TO SERVE THE GREATEST NUMBER OF PEOPLE? EDUCATION IS ORGANIZED AROUND INSTITUTIONS, CREDITS, AND CREDENTIALS. ARE WE PREPARED TO RESTRUCTURE IT AROUND LEARNERS?

WHERE ARE THE NATION'S ADULT LEARNERS? WHAT ARE THEIR NEEDS AND INTERESTS?

RECENT STUDIES BY THE COMMISSION ON NON-TRADITIONAL STUDY AND BY THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AND OTHER TOPFLIGHT INSTITUTIONS HAVE COME UP WITH SOME PROVOCATIVE FINDINGS. AS A FEW EXAMPLES:

ADULTS ARE MUCH LESS INTERESTED IN ACCUMULATING CREDIT HOURS THAN IN ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE.

ADULTS WANT TO LEARN FOR PRACTICAL REASONS RELATED TO THEIR JOB, HOME, FAMILY, SPORT, OR HOBBY.

TWO THIRDS OF ALL ADULT LEARNERS PLAN THEIR OWN EDUCATION PROGRAM WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL HELP.

MOST INTERESTING OF ALL, MUCH ADULT LEARNING IS NOT CARRIED ON IN THE SCHOOL OR COLLEGE BUT IN THE HOME, WITH BOOKS AND MAGAZINES AS THE PRINCIPAL LEARNING RESOURCES.

ADULT EDUCATION COULD REACH OUT TO THESE MOTIVATED PEOPLE AND MAKE THEIR HOME-BASED LEARNING ENDEAVORS MUCH MORE EFFECTIVE. I'M THINKING OF COUNSELING SERVICES, DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICULUM MATERIALS, PERHAPS EVEN MAKING INSTRUCTORS, CREDENTIALED OR NOT, AVAILABLE TO TEACH SMALL GROUPS OF ADULTS WITH SIMILAR LEARNING INTERESTS IN THE PACEMENT OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH OR COMMUNITY CENTER. OUTREACH TO THE COMMUNITY IS, IN MY JUDGMENT, THE NEXT IMPORTANT MOVEMENT IN EDUCATION.

THIS OUTREACH IDEA IS ALSO APPLICABLE TO ANOTHER LARGE SEGMENT OF THE ADULT POPULATION THAT NEEDS HELP SIMPLY IN COPING WITH EVERYDAY LIFE IN THIS COMPLEX SOCIETY.

A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO I HELD A NEWS CONFERENCE TO RELEASE THE FINDINGS OF A MAJOR FOUR-YEAR INVESTIGATION OF THE COPING AND SURVIVAL SKILLS OF AMERICAN ADULTS. THE SUMMARY REPORT IS CALLED <u>ADULT FUNCTIONAL COMPETENCY</u>. I THINK YOU'LL FIND IT FASCINATING, IF SOMEWHAT DISCOURAGING, READING.

THE INVESTIGATION WAS FUNDED BY THE OFFICE OF EDUCATION AND IS BETTER KNOWN AS THE <u>ADULT PERFORMANCE LEVEL STUDY</u>. IT WASN'T CONCERNED WITH THE ABILITY OF ADULTS TO READ, WRITE, OR DO ARITHMETIC AT SOME ARBITRARILY CHOSEN GRADE LEVEL — THIRD GRADE, SAY, OR FIFTH. RATHER, IT LOOKED AT ABILITY TO DEAL WITH REAL LIFE SITUATIONS, FROM SHOPPING IN THE SUPERMARKET TO GETTING ARRESTED.

THE STUDY CONSIDERED FIVE BROAD CATEGORIES OF EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE:

OCCUPATIONAL KNOWLEDGE.

CONSUMER ECONOMICS.

HEALTH.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES, AND--

GOVERNMENT AND LAW.

THE STUDY ASSUMED THAT IN EACH CATEGORY ADULTS WOULD NEED A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF THE THREE RS, PLUS PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS AND THE ABILITY TO GET ALONG WITH PEOPLE.

INVESTIGATORS INTERVIEWED 1,500 PERSONS, A STATISTICALLY REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF THE TOTAL U.S. POPULATION. THEY RANGED FROM DOCTORS, STORE MANAGERS, AND BANK TELLERS TO LONG DISTANCE TRUCKERS AND CONSTRUCTION WORKERS. THEY INCLUDED PH.D.S AND HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS, BOTH SEXES, AND ETHNIC MINORITIES.

IN THE OCCUPATIONAL KNOWLEDGE CATEGORY, THE 1,500 RESPONDENTS WERE ASKED SUCH QUESTIONS AS, FOR EXAMPLE: "DO YOU KNOW WHAT EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER MEANS?" SADLY, ONE IN FIVE DIDN'T KNOW.

IN THE HEALTH CATEGORY, THE RESPONDENTS WERE ASKED WHETHER THEY KNEW HOW TO GET PROFESSIONAL HELP IN EASING THEIR CHILDREN'S TRANSITION FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD. IN CONSUMER ECONOMICS, THEY WERE ASKED WHETHER THEY WERE AWARE OF FACTORS AFFECTING FOOD COSTS. IN COMMUNITY RESOURCES, THEY WERE ASKED WHERE THEY WOULD APPLY FOR SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE BENEFITS. IN GOVERNMENT AND LAW, THEY WERE QUERIED ABOUT THEIR RIGHTS IF ARRESTED.

THESE ARE SAMPLE TOPICS. THERE WERE MANY MORE IN EVERY CATEGORY.

PROJECTING THE RESPONSES OF THESE 1,500 PERSONS, THE STUDY CONCLUDED THAT:

AMERICANS HAVE MORE TROUBLE WITH EVERYDAY PROBLEMS IN CONSUMER ECONOMICS THAN IN ANY OTHER KNOWLEDGE AREA. NEARLY 35 MILLION ADULTS -- ALMOST A THIRD OF THE ADULT POPULATION -- HAVE TROUBLE BUYING LIFE INSURANCE, USING CREDIT, SHOPPING WISELY, AND HANDLING OTHER FACETS OF CONSUMER ECONOMICS.

ONE FOURTH OF ALL AMERICANS CANNOT UNDERSTAND THEIR RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS UNDER OUR SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT AND LAW.

ONE IN FIVE ADULTS HAS TROUBLE WITH OCCUPATIONAL KNOWLEDGE -- THE BASICS OF FINDING, GETTING, HOLDING, AND ADVANCING IN A JOB.

FINALLY, IN THE SKILLS TESTED -- READING, WRITING, COMPUTATION, PROBLEM SOLVING, AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS -- THE 1,500 PEOPLE SURVEYED HAD MOST TROUBLE WITH ARITHMETIC, THE EVERYDAY ARITHMETIC NEEDED TO BALANCE A CHECKBOOK, FIGURE THE UNIT PRICE OF FOODS, AND CALCULATE INTEREST CHARGES ON CREDIT ACCOUNTS. PROJECTED TO THE TOTAL POPULATION, THE STUDY CONCLUDED THAT 39 MILLION AMERICANS ARE UNABLE TO PERFORM BASIC COMPUTATIONS AND THAT ANOTHER 30 MILLION CAN BARELY GET BY.

On the positive side, people know more about community resources and how to use them than any other knowledge area tested, and they handle everyday writing requirements better than they handle reading, problem solving, or any other skill.

These are significant findings. They tell us much about the ability of Americans to cope with the complexities of daily life in the seventies. And they say millions of Americans aren't making it.

I also think the study, by implication, poses basic questions about our education system. Parents have an obligation to teach children as many coping skills as they themselves possess. Schools, however, have an obligation to provide structured learning programs in this area. As the Adult Performance Level Study shows, schools have failed to meet this obligation somewhere along the line, probably at the junior or senior high school level.

Fortunatley, some States and localities are already dealing with the problem as it relates to youngsters now coming up through their schools. Oregon now requires that high school seniors pass economic and social survival skill tests as a requirement for graduation. California and some other States are moving in this direction.

For adults, obviously, the responsibility for providing coping skills rests with the adult education community. The study recommends a number of things you can do to build survival competencies into your adult education programs.

CENTRAL TO THESE RECOMMENDATIONS IS A SET OF 65 LEARNING OBJECTIVES. OBJECTIVES IN THE OCCUPATIONAL KNOWLEDGE AREA INCLUDE SUCH THINGS AS LEARNING HOW TO FILL OUT A JOB APPLICATION AND HANDLE A JOB INTERVIEW. ONE OBJECTIVE IN CONSUMER ECONOMICS IS TO LEARN THE PRINCIPLES OF COMPARISON SHOPPING AND HOW TO RELATE PRICE TO QUALITY IN SELECTING FOOD, CLOTHING, APPLIANCES, AND OTHER ITEMS. A HEALTH OBJECTIVE IS TO LEARN HOW TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL HAZARDS IN THE HOME OR OFFICE.

THESE 65 OBJECTIVES HAVE MANY USES. THEY ENABLE YOU TO TEST THE COPING SKILLS OF YOUR ADULT STUDENTS, OR INDEED THE ADULT POPULATION OF AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY OR STATE. AND I THINK I SHOULD POINT OUT THAT EVEN AN ALBERT EINSTEIN CAN BE AS INEPT AS AN UNDEREDUCATED PERSON IN COPING WITH LIFE OUTSIDE HIS OWN AREA OF EXPERTISE. EINSTEIN WAS SO IMMERSED IN THE ABSTRACT THAT HE HAD TROUBLE READING A BUS SCHEDULE OR REMEMBERING TO CARRY MONEY.

THE OBJECTIVES ARE ALSO THE CORE AROUND WHICH REMEDIAL INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS CAN BE BUILT AND TEACHERS TRAINED IN HOW TO TEACH THESE PROGRAMS. FINALLY, THE OBJECTIVES ARE YARDSTICKS TO EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS IN MEETING ADULT COPING NEEDS.

I HOPE ELECTED STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS WHO SET PRIORITIES AND DETERMINE BUDGETS, ALONG WITH EDUCATORS, WILL RECOGNIZE THIS STUDY FOR WHAT IT IS: A CAREFUL STATISTICAL MEASURE OF HOW MANY AMERICANS ARE UNABLE TO MEET EFFECTIVELY THE REQUIREMENTS OF DAY-TO-DAY LIVING -- AND A TOOL TO HELP EDUCATORS DESIGN, TEST, IMPLEMENT, AND EVALUATE REMEDIAL LEARNING PROGRAMS FOR THEM.

LET ME RETURN TO THE OUTREACH IDEA. I SAID EARLIER THAT ADULT EDUCATION SHOULD MAKE A REAL EFFORT TO ASSIST PEOPLE ALREADY ENGAGED IN SELF-HELP LEARNING AT HOME. I STRESS THIS POINT AGAIN. THESE ARE MOTIVATED PEOPLE. IF THEY DIDN'T WANT TO IMPROVE THEIR CAREER OR PERSONAL LIFE, THEY WOULDN'T BE DEVOTING PRECIOUS EFFORT AND LEISURE TIME TO THE LEARNING ENTERPRISE. I FEEL CONFIDENT THAT THEY WOULD WELCOME GUIDANCE AND ASSISTANCE FROM ADULT EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS.

BUT A MORE CHALLENGING TASK FOR ADULT EDUCATION, IN MY JUDGMENT, IS TO HELP THE MILLIONS OF FUNCTIONALLY INCOMPETENT PEOPLE IDENTIFIED IN THE ADULT PERFORMANCE LEVEL STUDY.

WE DON'T KNOW HOW MANY OF THESE PEOPLE REALIZE THEY ARE INCOMPETENT. WE DON'T KNOW HOW MANY REALIZE THEY CAN LEARN HOW TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY. WE DON'T KNOW HOW MANY KNOW WHERE TO GO FOR HELP. WE DON'T KNOW HOW MANY ARE MOTIVATED TO DO ANYTHING TO IMPROVE THEIR SITUATION.

I HOPE THAT STATE AND LOCAL ADULT POPULATION ASSESSMENTS WILL FILL THESE INFORMATION GAPS. AND I FERVENTLY HOPE THAT YOU AND YOUR COLLEAGUES, AS THE SHAKERS AND DOERS IN ADULT EDUCATION, ARE THINKING ABOUT WAYS TO INTEREST AND SERVE THESE PEOPLE.

BETTER THAN ANY OTHER MEMBERS OF OUR EDUCATION-ORIENTED SOCIETY, EDUCATORS KNOW THAT KNOWLEDGE IS THE GREAT LIBERATOR. WITHOUT IT, AT LEAST IN FUNDAMENTAL MATTERS, PEOPLE GO THROUGH LIFE WITH ONE HAND TIED BEHIND THEM.

So I think our commitment to a learning society should be -- must be -- devoted in large measure to helping those who need it most. That means a commitment to innovation and change, to building learning programs around students rather than institutions. In adult education, it means to find people who would not likely seek help on their own and encourage them to undertake a learning program. It means developing instructional activities and materials applicable to the real world people live in, with the understanding that the real world of Watts or Appalachia is a long way from the real world of the average college campus. It means using whatever community facilities and other resources you can find in Watts or Appalachia to teach wherever people can and will assemble to learn.

The other day I read a story by a retired professor who taught adult education in the depression thirties. Fortunately, the seventies aren't the thirties, but the story makes a telling point, and on it I will close.

The professor said a bright but down-on-his-luck father of four came to see him about getting more education. Among other courses, the professor suggested a freshman survey of English literature. The man thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No," he said, "not right at first. I'll read Chaucer with you some time, but first learn me enough to earn me enough to buy shoes for the kids."